RADICAL PERIODICALS IN THE UNITED STATES

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THE ROAD TO COMMUNISM

Volumes 1-2
1934-1935

Introduction to the Greenwood reprint by

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Introduction

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Introduction

Road to Communism was the theoretical journal of the American Communist party (Opposition). It appeared in 1934–1935 under the editorship of Jay Lovestone, who also was the leader of the CPO. Student revolutionaries, black resisters, bourgeois democrats, and historians of the social movements of the Great Depression will find this essential reading.

In 1934, two questions crucial to an assessment of the political climate of the day were being discussed by the Communist party. The first question was, "How stabilized is capitalism?" For if capitalism is stabilized, the time is not ripe for revolution. But even though there were many leaking seams in the capitalist ships of state, it seemed likely that they would remain afloat for quite some time. The second question was whether bourgeois democracy is really any different from fascism. Fascism had come to power recently in Italy, Germany and Austria, and it looked as if other Fascist governments would soon peak in Central Europe. It was the contention of *Road to Communism* that left-wing infantilists had overlooked the notable differences between the two, and by doing so, had encouraged fascism with a shrug. "There can be no doubt about it, but that Fascist dictatorship is the elimination and smashing of bourgeois democracy." But the Communist party of Germany and the Communist Internationale both looked upon the Bruening, Papen, and Schleicher governments as carrying through the Fascist dictatorship. Such blindness proved "flagrant imbecility"—a step lower, according to *RTC*, than any achieved heretofore by Socialists.

One of the main theses of *RTC* was that social democracy is a treacherous movement to try to win over the workingman to capitalism through parliamentary and democratic illusions. Furthermore, it "objectively furthers fascism" by pretending that there is no difference between fascism and bourgeois democracy. The contradictory nature of these two views was often missed by the uneducated worker. Social democracy, however, posing as anticapitalist yet unable to explain its inactivity in fighting capitalism, brought up the following

red-herring (which it employs even today) that "the growing revolutionary danger, the threat to the rule of capital by the working class has brought fascism into existence as a counter movement." On the contrary, replied *RTC*, "The inability of the proletariat to struggle, the splits within the working class movement, were the conditions not only for the growth of fascism but also for bourgeoisie to risk a fascist coup d'etat because it no longer feared the working class." Today the social democrats attempt to split the student movement and the black movement, but have little reason to worry about the workers since they have been split since World War II. They made their position clear when they purged the Communists from their lily-white unions.

A more popular theme today, the Negro question, was also dealt with. According to *RTC*, to understand the Negro question one must first understand the South. One must also understand the North because the two sections were becoming interpenetrated. White supremacy, even among Socialists, according to an anonymous author (perhaps Jay Lovestone), impoverished any theory concerning the Negro question and reduced it to the economic question of workers against bosses. This could no longer be tolerated, especially among Communists. The economic crisis of the 1930s, unemployment, and chaos in the cotton industry had made it imperative to "explain" the Negro question. The major points made were as follows: (1) The Negro people represent a caste or a noncaste like the outcastes or nonscheduled castes in India; they are not a national minority. (2) Since the North prevented the final emancipation of the Negro, racial oppression has become an integral part of the bourgeois-imperialist system of the United States. (3) American farmers and workers have been brainwashed by the bourgeoisie to be anti-Negro, and this feeling is reinforced by the psychic compensation it affords them (as in Sartre's *Portrait of the Anti-Semite)*. (4) Because of the migration of the Negro to the North, a Negro bourgeoisie and petite bourgeoisie has developed, and Negro society begun to develop into a colony or subject nation. The fundamental statement of this trend is to be found in Booker T. Washington's "Atlanta Compromise." Washington (1856–1915) was the prototype of the "race leader" to be found in church, business, labor, and entertainment thereafter. It is notable that "Only in the proportion of clergy to the population do the Negroes show precedence." They were important as serving the capitalists as "race leaders."

RTC predicted that the Negro petite bourgeoisie would play a progressive and significant social role in the struggle of the Negro people. But they must first rid themselves of the "strange faith" that the Negro question can be solved within the framework of capitalism. Today, said *RTC,* "the Negro intellectuals and professionals are lost in the absurd utopia of creating a self-contained Negro economy, through utilizing here the 'organized buying power of the race'. . . ." Instead of political and economic reality, a fuzzy and capricious know-nothingism results. Yet this will be countered by the growth of the Negro proletariat who will separate themselves and the farmers from the Negro bourgeoisie. Ultimately the Negro proletariat must join with the white proletariat to overthrow the capitalist system. What must the Communists do to speed up this process? First, they must defend the Negro workers, peasants, and petite bourgeoisie. Second, they must weld these same Negroes against the white ruling class. Third, they must break down the barriers between Negro and white workers. Fourth, they must fight against the peonage and serfdom of the Negro farmers in the South. Fifth, they must stand for the complete equality of the Negro socially and politically. Sixth and last, they must struggle against lynching, jim crowism, and discrimination.

Another issue faced yearly by radicals in the United States is the desirability of a third party. *RTC* faced this issue in 1935. At that time it was possible to envisage a noncapitalist third party composed of workers and farmers. It seemed propitious for the workers to start such a party for the following reasons: (1) there was a noticeable breakdown of craft unionism (just before the institution of the CIO); (2) the gap between skilled and unskilled labor was being narrowed; (3) the aristocracy of labor had a diminishing base; (4) virtual cessation of immigration had helped repair the split between American-born and foreign-born workers; and (5) outbreaks of third-party spirit could be seen in Upton Sinclair's "Epic" movements and "Ham-n-Eggs" in California, La Follette's Progressive party in Wisconsin, and Olsen's Farmer-Labor party in Minnesota. Furthermore, it was clear that the New Deal was helping only the big capitalists, was enlarging the bureaucracy (government-big business alliance) and was acting as a strikebreaker for business. Its real role was encapsulated in the phrase "the Roosevelt myth."

But a mere third party made up of the irritated petite bourgeoisie was not the answer. What was needed was a Labor party composed

of blacks and whites, American-born and foreign-born alike. A party like the States' Rights or Wallace's American Independent (1967) would be valueless for it merely perpetuates the same old capitalist system. *RTC* believed the CPO must "stimulate and hasten the historical process of a Labor Party development . . . through propaganda, agitation and through its influence in the trade unions." Such a party would at the outset "have a confused program, lacking clarity in its politics, inadequate from the proletarian revolution viewpoint." Nevertheless, much good could come out of such a party; without it a firm base for change would be impossible. What is needed is a "Marxist-Leninist educational program to prepare labor for such a Third Party directed toward a socialist society."

There were no humorous columns or light touches in the grave message of the *RTC*. Yet, if one wanted to find a change of pace from political analysis it could be found in the article "The Application of Dialectical Materialism to the History of Art and Literature," by August Thalheimer, theoretician of German Marxism. Much of this article is a commentary on the critical writing of Franz Mehring (1846–1919), literary critic and one of the founders of Marxist aesthetics. Always a step-daughter of bourgeois philosophy, aesthetics from a Marxist point of view has scarcely received any more attention. The tendency to deal in shibboleths instead of concrete analysis is particularly noticeable here, even though Thalheimer speaks against "empty generalizations."

In dealing with the history and canons of aesthetics, Thalheimer claims, we must examine "the inner structure of economic conditions, economic development, and of class relations." The stages of bourgeois consciousness must be deduced from the economic stages. Unsuspected treasures of interpretation will thus appear.

Aesthetic theory is needed, and although Mehring did not provide it, he did make a start in his examination of German classical literature, using Schiller and Kant as starting points. According to Kant, "the highest ideal of art is man. Art should be law observant without law, teleological without purpose." This was the first theoretical blow to classical art and literature, just as Marx later shattered classical economics. Kant's and Schiller's flaw was in seeing aesthetic laws as separate from the art of the "rising, revolutionary bourgeoisie." They saw aesthetic laws as eternal and absolute. This Marxism can never allow, anymore than it can take seriously the claim that capitalist laws of production and circulation are natural and eternal.

"Can a scientific history of aesthetic feelings, as they have progressed in human society, be written?" To this question, the Marxist answer must be yes. According to Mehring, "Every creative work of art creates its own aesthetics." Instead of art conforming to aesthetics, aesthetics must conform to art. This does not mean interruption in aesthetic analysis, since classical aesthetics contains laws that extend beyond a single epoch of art. Naturalism, for example, is able to describe the transitory *as it is*. Idealization, as in the characterization by Schiller of Wallenstein, gives a truer picture than is possible to draw in historical writing. Great art never blindly ignores the pressing problems of its time. But "bourgeois aesthetics permitted bourgeois propaganda to be sowed thickly in art" while condemning Socialist propaganda as "true propaganda." Schiller and Kant separated form and content without recognizing their reciprocity. In this they were bourgeois aestheticians.

Hegel's aesthetics is not treated by Mehring. This is an oversight, Thalheimer maintains, because Hegel reveals the completion of scientific aesthetics in a bourgeois framework. Despite Hegel's penchant for explaining art in terms of religion, he did show the connections between social relations (class relations), the forms of production, and the form and content of art. For this reason he cannot be ignored. Indeed, Thalheimer says, "[Hegel's] class characterizations of Cervantes, Don Quixote, of the chivalric epos, of Ariosto, of Dutch painting, could easily be taken over by a history of art of aesthetics base[d] on dialectical materialism."

Marxist aesthetics has the practical task first of understanding the artistic expression of the bourgeoisie and, second, of rejecting reactionary bourgeois thought in its artistic form since there it is most cryptic and sly.

RTC also discussed problems facing the Communist Internationale, the Czechoslovakian question, the cause of German and Austrian fascism, the fight of the Barcelona workers against the fascism of Madrid, the United Front in France, and the definition and meaning of "communism" as seen by the CPO. They are treated with dignity, knowledge, and concern, adding a great deal to our knowledge of the radical movement in the mid-1930s.

—Dale Riepe
Buffalo, New York, 1969